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52

Epimetheus



TO
MY
Students



— BY —

J. CLARK MURRAY

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Epimetheus

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Epimetheus.

TO MY STUDENTS.

I.

Mysteriously the voice of nature sounds
In many a tone.
The thunder-peal from hill to hill rebounds:
Anon is blown
A whisper scarcely heard from aspen-trees
That quiver under a scarce-moving breeze
On summer afternoons.
But those are other tunes
The wind, in wintry hour,
Shouts scudding o'er the ocean
In the strong joy of power,
The glory of swift motion.
And that is still another song
That Nature sings the whole day long
In murmuring of wayward brooks
Down lonely glens, in woody nooks.

But though the sounds that strike the ear
Be e'er so clear,
The thought, which Nature through them speaks,
In vain man seeks
Until he brings the thought in his own soul.
That can alone unroll
The meaning of the hidden powers
Which thrill through all the myriad tones
That Nature owns :
Nothing we hear in these but what is ours.

II.

And now when Memory spreads her sails
To catch once more the genial gales
Which bore me oft with many a crew
That every autumn brought anew
To thrid the windings of the shore,
Where all the fruits of human lore,
As by an alchemy divine,
Distil a spiritual wine
Full potent to enchant the soul
With visions of the World-whole,
From many a bay
And many a headland bold
The breezes, that of old
Were wont to play,
Sweep o'er the strings

Of passion and of thought
Till the soul rings
With voices that are fraught
With all the mystery of Nature's tones.
'Tis in such voices that our nature owns
The universal nature that we share.
O therefore ye, to whom these voices bear
Their message, bring with you the mind
Of eagerness to find
Whatever love selects of good
To be the fool
Of that true life which knows not death,
But draws its breath
From the eternal thought
Of which the world is wrought.

III.

For, though these voices cannot thrill
With the melodious skill
Of bards whose sense of tone
By tender art has grown
Until it seems a finer ear
Tuned with a subtle power to hear
The rhythmic motions of the Eternal Will,
Yet the dear lisplings of a child
Speak to the gentle heart
More than the phrases that are piled

In curious forms of art.
Nor may it be too bold to hope,
These stammering accents may call back
The voice that led you on the track
On which you erst essayed to grope
Your way to that serener height
From which the soul attains clear sight
Of life's divine significance.
The old voice, heard once more, perchance
May strike an echo from the past,
That rings with memories of your own,
In happy chime with every tone
Of thought and feeling, which shall last
With me while life retains the joy
With which ye have enriched its glorious employ.

IV.

For whatsoe'er the hue
With which a kindly fancy tints
The pictures that your memory prints
In her review
Of scenes where we have toiled together,
Yet shall no stress of stormy weather,
E'en when life's drift is whirled
Across a hope-lorn world,
E'er stifle that perennial mood
Of earnest happy gratitude,

Which floats through all my thoughts of those old
Like a delicious steam [times,
Of odours wafted from ethereal climes,
Soothing the soul into a glorious dream
Of that ambrosial home
From which they come.
O truly spoke the ancient sage.
Who traced the sources of his lore,
Part to his teachers, and still more
To fellowships of his own age,
But found by far the richest store
In that great harvest always growing
From seed he had been daily sowing
Among the youth,
Who came with generous yearning
To reap the ripe fruits of his learning,
And gave him back a wiser insight into truth.

V.

Ay me! the tides of life
Abide not always at the flow.
Oft-times they ebb so low
They scarce can carry all the weight
Of what is needed for its toil and strife.
And then goes overboard the precious freight
That gives to life its glory and its power,—
The memories that make delicious food

For a reflective hour,
The hopes that fire the blood
With visions of a good
Which, though far off in measurements of time,
Is ever near at hand
In that transcendent clime
Which is our native land.
Yet even then it is to you
The rescue from despair is due.
When in the gloom of doubts and fears
The toil of all the years
Shows like the meaningless unrest of waves
That tumble on a shoreless sea,
Often from you there comes to me
A voice that saves
By its brave tone of cheer,
As when the spirit has been pent in caves
Of sleepless fever through a stifling night.
With the returning light
There breaks upon the ear,
From leaves of gladly fluttering trees,
The whisper of a freshening breeze
That bursts from the opening portals of the Dawn.
For ye, too, have been drawn
Into the noble warfare for the right;
And ye, too, find the battle's dust
May often dim the sight,
The arm may sink unnerved

With the unremitting fight,
The heart before that never swerved
May yield in sickening distrust
From weariness of hope deferred.
And yet I learn that ye are not deterred
By shapes of horror that are but creations
Of fearful fancy peopling a void gloom.
For often, to illumine
The tangled mazes amid which ye fare,
Through Memory's clear air
There gleam some kindly scintillations
Of that dear light
Which made our life-task bright,
And still sends gladdening smiles
E'en from those earlier years which seem
Now fading into days of yore
On that limerock-bound shore,
Where the broad waters of our noble stream
Wander bewildered 'mong a thousand isles,
As well as from these years in which life's fount
Has seemed to flow with many a gain
On that fair slope, where Charles's Wain
Swings nightly o'er the Royal Mount.
And not without triumphant glee
At times I see
The keen resistless sword
Of a brave truthful word
Swoop down upon a blatant lie,

And shiver all its power of harm,
O deem it not all vanity
If, when I recognize the arm
That strikes the trenchant blow,
I dare to feel
Exultant in the thought, "I know
The place which tempered that true steel."

VI.

The darkest cloud of man's despair
Is fringed with glorious light;
Its gloom is but a shadow thrown
From splendours flashing on his sight.
For, though in rapture he may dare
To build a hope of making them his own,
Yet at the best his toilsome care
Leaves but a work of dull and sombre hue
To mortify his view.
The very reason, therefore, he makes moan
Is that he cannot choose to be deceived,
But that his nature keeps him true
To those imperial splendours he has known,
More fair by far than aught he has achieved.
For oft he seems like some ill-fated creature
That once had wings,
And still bears many a feature
Recalling an activity that springs

Above earth's dust and mire,
And, as it soars still higher, sings
The rapture of a flight,
That seems as if it would aspire
To reach the ethereal infinite.
But no ; a surer light
Is dawning in that glorious lore,
In which, from more to more,
The Sovereign Reason of the world
Throughout the ages is unfurled.
That lore reveals the story,
Not of a vanished glory
Which man may ne'er retrieve,
Rather of undeveloped power.
Like that which is the dower
Of infancy ; and the whole life of man,
Whate'er it may achieve
E'en in its longest span,
Shows but as childhood to a vast career.
For the most searching gaze
Of science into that dim haze
That veils the world's infinitude
Appears, in sober mood,
But as the wondering look
Of infant-eyes that peer
Into some little nook
They see, but cannot understand ;
And, howsoever grand

Man's loftiest endeavour,
Yet doth it ever
Seem but as childlike play,
Forecasting great activities,
Of which, while sense and fancy still hold sway,
He can but strike some pleasing images.
So thrills the eagle-nestling's wing
With many a prophetic flutter,
Ere yet his feeble throat can utter
Its strong defiant cry
At the majestic sweep
Of the imperial pinions, as they fling
Adown the eery's dizzy steep,
Or mount exultingly on high
To roam at will the boundless spaces of the sky.

VII.

And therefore when that fire beneficent,
Which burns through all the processes of time,
And drains away the dross of human deeds,
Has tried the work in which these years were spent,
Your kindly recognition feeds
A hope sublime,
That that fierce trial may unfold,
Out of its fiery foam,
Some residue of that true gold
Which forms the current coin of our eternal home.

LOVELL TYP.